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# Wealth as an Immortality Symbol in the Qur'an: A Reconsideration of the *māl/amwāl* Verses

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Man now took the sacred and tried to give it monumental, enduring form ... If the new dramatization of immortality was to be in the power and glitter of the visible rather than the invocation of the invisible, then the drama had to be transferred from the group to the new magic object, money. Money is the new 'totemic' possession (Ernest Becker).<sup>1</sup>

*Woe to every [kind of] scandal-monger and-backbiter, who pileth up wealth (māl) and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever! (Q. 104:1–3).*

## Introduction

Historically, academic research on the Qur'anic approach to wealth and ownership has been carried out largely from two disciplinary perspectives: jurisprudence and economics. For the jurist, the Qur'anic *ayas* which deal with this issue are an important primary source for the deduction of rulings pertaining to inheritance, alimony, bride-price and a whole host of commercial transactions which fall under the remit of Shari'ah law. For the economist, the Qur'anic approach to wealth is the unavoidable point of entry to the discipline of Islamic economics and finance, and to contemporary debate on the application of Shari'ah norms to the modern economy. Similarly, outwith the Islamic tradition, much has been written on the anthropology of wealth accumulation and the history of man's obsession with money and private ownership. On the symbology of wealth in the Qur'an, however, little if anything has been written.

In a number of key Qur'anic *ayas*, inordinate love of wealth (*māl*) is presented as one of the obstacles preventing man from wholehearted submission to the truths of revelation. Together with idolatry and blind allegiance to ancestral customs, wealth-pride is a characteristic shared by all of the 'addressee communities' whose stories are recounted in the Qur'an.<sup>2</sup> For some of these groups, one's honour and position in society depends almost exclusively on the amount one owns and the number of offspring one begets, and the accumulation of property and children has primacy

over all other worldly objectives. Consequently, not only do the teachings of prophets regarding wealth fall repeatedly on deaf ears, but the prophets themselves are rejected on the grounds that they lack what all men prize most highly: abundance of wealth and progeny.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this paper is to focus on a dimension of the Qur'anic discourse on wealth which has hitherto been overlooked. In one singularly enigmatic aya, Q. 104:3, the Qur'an interprets the lure of material possessions as nothing less than a symptom of man's desire to live forever. Taking this aya as our conceptual starting point, this paper aims to explore the notion of wealth as an immortality symbol, with particular reference to those passages in the Qur'an which detail the negative encounters between the prophets and their addressee communities. Using as our theoretical basis the principle of 'immortality striving' developed by cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, we shall explore the ramifications of Q. 104:1–3 for the rest of the ayas on *māl*, guided by the hypothesis that not only is the desire for immortality key to our understanding of the 'rejection narratives', but also that it is crucial to our appreciation of the psycho-dynamics which underpin all human activity.

To this end, the study will focus on the Qur'anic use of the word *māl* (wealth; property) and its plural *amwāl* (goods; possessions; belongings), particularly in the context of the rejection narratives. The *māl/amwāl* verses are of course not the only means through which the Qur'an deals with the issue of wealth, ownership and – by extension – aspirations to immortality. As W. Montgomery Watt asserts quite rightly, the concept of *istighnā'* or the feeling of pride that comes with the perception that one's wealth has made one independent, particularly of God, is an important sub-text in the rejection of Muḥammad by the Meccan henotheists.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, ayas such as Q. 102:1, which alludes to man's desire to surpass his fellow men in terms of acquisition of worldly abundance, are also important indicators of the pre-Muḥammadan attitude to ownership.<sup>5</sup> However, the scope of an article such as this means that workable limits have to be drawn and frames of reference established. Consequently, *māl* and *amwāl* have been chosen as the subject of analysis, although, it must be said, not for the sake of brevity and focus alone: wealth, possessions and offspring are, as this paper attempts to show, the most conspicuous of all the immortality symbols which appear in the Qur'an, and as such lend themselves more readily to analysis from a Beckerian perspective.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Māl/amwāl*: Definition and Terms of Reference**

There is no consensus regarding either the origin of the Arabic word *māl* or its precise meaning. According to Pressner, the word is formed from *mā* and *lī* and means properly anything that belongs to anyone;<sup>7</sup> another explanation is that it derives from the root *mawwala*, one meaning of which is 'to finance'.<sup>8</sup> Ibn Manẓūr defines *māl* as things commonly known and which can be owned,<sup>9</sup> while Ibn al-Athīr

defines it as everything that one owns.<sup>10</sup> These definitions take into account the customary practices of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Originally, the Arabs used the term to refer only to gold and silver, but subsequently its application was extended to include things owned physically – camels in particular.

Jurisprudential definitions of the word *māl* are also not few in number. For the Ḥanafīs, *māl* must be something which exists physically and is desirable; according to Ibn ʿĀbidīn, it is whatever human instinct inclines to and is also capable of being stored for future use.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, rights and usufruct do not constitute *māl* since they are incapable of being stored. The definitions given by Mālikī, Shāfiʿī and Ḥanbalī scholars appear to be as one with regard to the criteria by which something can be considered *māl*. For the Mālikīs, as represented here by al-Shāṭibī, *māl* is anything over which ownership is exercised and which the owner is free to enjoy without fear of expropriation by others.<sup>12</sup> The Shāfiʿī school defines *māl* as that which gives benefit; al-Suyūṭī asserts that the word refers to anything that is both valuable and exchangeable, and whose owner is entitled to compensation in the event of its destruction.<sup>13</sup> The Ḥanbalīs define *māl* as things from which benefit accrues and which are capable of being used in normal circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

As can be seen from the above, if the jurisprudential schools differ on this issue, it is on the question of emphasis, with the Mālikīs underscoring the concept of ownership; the Shāfiʿīs stressing the importance of value; and the Ḥanbalīs singling out the issue of benefit and usability. The diversity of these perspectives allows us to posit the widest possible definition of *māl* to include things which are tangible or intangible, corporeal or incorporeal. Thus the definitional scope of *māl* can be seen to include ownership over non-material things such as rights and usufruct, so long, of course, as they do not contravene the precepts of the Sharīʿa. Such a definition of *māl* also allows us to confine our English translation to one word, 'wealth', which may express either anything that one owns which has economic utility; or an abundance of material possessions and resources, depending on the context.

The matter at hand – wealth as an immortality symbol – is, of course, as far removed from the ambit of jurisprudence as we can get. Furthermore, the Beckerian paradigm is far more concerned with the hubris of 'wealth-pride' than it is with the definitional limits of the word 'wealth'. However, it is important for the foundations of our discussion to establish a certain level of convergence between the scholarly understanding of *māl* in Muslim circles and the notion of wealth used by Becker. In his later works, wealth is used in the broadest sense possible, signifying either anything one possesses or, as pointed out earlier, an abundance of what is possessed. There is, therefore, common ground between the Qur'anic meaning of *māl* and that which is understood by Becker.

In its Qur'anic context, *amwāl*, the plural form of *māl*, is translated variously as 'goods', 'property' and 'possessions'. Conceptually, there appears to be little difference between *māl* and *amwāl*, just as there is little difference between the English words 'wealth' and 'belongings'. However, the fact that the word *amwāl* is used with far greater frequency in the Medinan ayas than in the Meccan may suggest that there is a technical aspect to the plural which does not apply to the singular.<sup>15</sup>

### **The *māl/amwāl* Verses in the Qur'an: An Overview**

It is appropriate at this point to attempt a conspectus of the Qur'anic treatment of *māl* and *amwāl*. Not only will this provide us with insights into how the Islamic revelation deals with the issue of wealth and ownership, but it will also serve to contextualise the issue of immortality symbology within a wider conceptual framework.

Dating individual suras of the Qur'an and establishing a workable chronology of revelation has never been an exact science, and as Neal Robinson points out, there is still no universally acclaimed tradition about the precise sequence in which the suras appeared.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, general agreement as to which suras belong to the Meccan phase of the revelation and which ones were revealed in Medina.<sup>17</sup> Compartmentalising any group of subject-related suras according to whether they are pre- or post-Hijrī often helps to throw light on the issue of thematic progression, and as we shall see this is certainly true to a large degree in the case of the *māl/amwāl* verses.<sup>18</sup>

A statistical survey of the Qur'an reveals 21 occurrences of the word *māl* and 9 occurrences of its plural, *amwāl*, in suras believed to have been revealed in Mecca.<sup>19</sup> In the Medinan suras, however, there are only 4 occurrences of the word *māl*, while *amwāl* appears no fewer than 52 times. This would appear to support the suggestion made earlier that *māl* correlates in part with a more abstract idea of wealth, whereas *amwāl* denotes for the most part the kind of tangible possessions that are subject to legislation, such as moveable wealth and taxable goods. The Medinan section is, one must remember, the *locus classicus* for the lion's share of legislative ayas in the Qur'an, and in this light it is arguably not surprising that occurrences of *amwāl* preponderate.

Thematically, the *māl/amwāl* verses break down into three broad categories: the definitional; the condemnatory; and the prescriptive. As one might expect, this typology is fluid and admits of a certain amount of overlap. Generally speaking, ayas classified here as definitional are those in which the purpose of *māl* in both human society and the greater cosmic scheme is delineated; passages which define and exemplify the attitude and behaviour of believers with respect to wealth are also included in this group. Condemnatory ayas are those in which 'unregenerate man' is

denounced either on account of his failure to understand the true nature and function of *māl* or as a result of his blatant abuse of wealth and position.<sup>20</sup> Prescriptive ayas are in the main those in which precepts on the correct use of *māl* are laid out; on account of overlap, certain examples of righteous conduct with regard to wealth are also included in this category.<sup>21</sup>

That most of the 29 ayas on *māl/amwāl* which appeared in Mecca are condemnatory should come as no surprise given the socio-cultural context in which Muḥammad's revelatory experience took place. Immediately, one senses, he needed to draw a number of distinct lines of demarcation between his nascent community of believers and the henotheistic society in which they were embedded. With regard to the issue of *māl*, Muḥammad drew such a line by denouncing the socio-cultural attitudes to wealth prevalent in Meccan society, rejecting it as thoroughly and uncompromisingly as the previous prophets had rejected the wealth-worship of their addressee communities, and for the same reason. Thus we read in the Meccan ayas on *māl* that man in general is afflicted by an inordinate love of wealth, which he often abuses with apparent impunity (Q. 89:19–20, *And ye devour inheritance – all with greed, and ye love wealth with inordinate love!*). The problem, however, would appear to be attitudinal rather than the simple matter of occasional profligacy. The Meccan portrait of unregenerate man paints him as someone for whom wealth is the key to both self-esteem and social status (Q. 68:14, *he possesses wealth and [numerous] sons*). Abundance of possessions is something revered for its ability to command the respect of others, and the Qur'an highlights the futility of those who either trust or ally themselves with others because of their greater wealth:

*[Abundant] was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: 'Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject [it]': For the wrong-doers We have prepared a Fire whose [smoke and flames] like the walls and roof of a tent, will hem them in (Q. 18:34).*

Indeed, so important is wealth to unregenerate man as an indicator of esteem that it becomes for him the criterion by which he judges the validity of claims to prophethood; consequently, those who purport to bring messages from God yet lack the power that flows from the possession of visible wealth are rejected, as in Q.71:21 (*Noah said: 'O my Lord they have disobeyed me, but they follow [men] whose wealth and children give them no increase but only loss*). Previous messengers were also rejected on account of the admonitory nature of their teachings on wealth: the people of the prophet Shu'ayb, for instance, were loathe to accept his call on account of the fact that it would mean not only giving up their idols but also relinquishing their freedom to do as they pleased with their wealth:

*They said: 'O Shu'ayb! Does thy prayer command thee that we leave off the worship which our fathers practised, or that we leave off doing what we like with our property? (Q. 11:87).*

There are also men for whom wealth is not merely an indication of worldly good fortune: an abundance of possessions and offspring is also considered by some to be a sign of divine favour, a conceit which the Qur'an is quick to reject (as in Q. 23:55–6, *Do they think that because We have granted them abundance of wealth and sons, We would hasten them on in every good?*).<sup>22</sup> Others believe that if there is a final judgement for man, wealth will have an intercessory role, acting as a means of protection against God's wrath, a position to which the Qur'an, again, responds (in, for example, Q. 26:88, *On that Day, neither wealth nor sons will avail*).<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, there are those, the Qur'an asserts, who *pileth up wealth and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever!* (Q. 104:1–3).

The Meccan ayas on *māl/amwāl* thus read like a series of cautionary reminders of the dangers inherent in the fetishisation of wealth – an affliction which, the Qur'an asserts, has blighted communities throughout history and prevented them from attaining true faith. *Wealth and sons*, the Qur'an avers in Q.18:46, are nothing more than *allurements of the life of this world*: they are ephemeral and should not be taken as the foundation for hope. Indeed, wealth and children (*al-amwāl wa'l-awlād*) are, we are told in Q. 17:64, just two of the means by which Satan attempts to fill man with pride and thus facilitate his downfall.

Apart from two allusions to charitable giving,<sup>24</sup> and two enjoinders not to take advantage of the property of orphans,<sup>25</sup> there is little by way of prescription in the Meccan ayas on *māl*. In the post-Hijrī revelations, however, a considerable change of emphasis occurs. With the advent of the Medinan community-state and the reshaping of the religious, political and socio-economic framework, a more nuanced exposition of the true nature and function of wealth is forthcoming. Wealth is now posited as a component of man's trial on earth: whether it leads to his felicity or his ruin depends on how he uses his wealth, and whether he disposes of it in accordance with the dictates of true belief, as in Q. 3:186, *Ye shall certainly be tried and tested in your possessions and in yourselves*.<sup>26</sup> Wealth and offspring are the means used by God to punish the unbelievers in this life, so that their souls may perish in the denial of God (Q. 9:55, *Let not their wealth nor their children dazzle thee: in reality God's wish is to punish them with these thing in this life, and that their souls may perish in their [very] denial of God*); believers must be aware at all times that their possessions and progeny are but a temptation and a test (*fīma*), and that it is God with whom their greatest reward lies (Q. 8:28, *know ye that your possessions and your progeny are but a trial: and that it is God with whom lies your highest reward*).

One consequence of the recasting of *māl* as the means of divine trial is the appearance in the Medinan ayas of two important, closely-related concepts concerning the proper use of wealth. One of these is the notion of spending one's wealth 'in God's cause'; the other is the belief that one's wealth becomes purified when at least a portion of it is reserved for charitable giving.<sup>27</sup> The Muslims of Medina are left in no doubt that any wealth they have is given to them by God and cannot be disposed of as they see fit. They are, for example, to spend out of their 'substance' (*māl*) on their kinfolk, orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, 'those who ask', and for the ransom of slaves (Q. 2:177). Muslim males now become obligated to spend of their wealth on dowries when marrying, and on financial support for their wives thereafter (Q. 4:24 and 34). Protection of the wealth of orphans is given special consideration, and Muslims are instructed how to deal financially with the fatherless children in their care (Q. 4:2, 5 and 6). These prescriptions are issued against a backdrop of enjoinders regarding the misuse of the things in one's possession: one's wealth is no longer to be wasted on 'vanities', or on bribes given in order to gain access to the wealth of others (Q. 2:188); wealth given away to charity is wasted wealth if one ruins one's action by reminding others of one's largesse (Q. 2:264), and so on. And at all times, the Muslims are advised not to let their wealth or their children divert them from the remembrance of God: *O ye who believe! Let not your riches or your children divert you from the remembrance of God! If any act thus, surely they are the losers* (Q. 63:9).

In the Medinan ayas, then, wealth becomes something which the Muslims must *consecrate* if they are to avoid the danger of 'wealth-pride' which so beleaguers the 'unregenerate man' portrayed in the Meccan ayas. Nowhere is this felt more acutely than in those ayas which extol the virtue of 'striving' (*jihād*) in God's cause with one's possessions (*amwāl*) and one's own person.<sup>28</sup> The *muhājirūn* are held up as exemplars on a number of occasions, and Muslims are exhorted to follow their pattern of belief (*īmān*), exile (*hijra*) and striving (*jihād*) to the extent they are able: those who believe, suffer exile and strive with their goods and persons have the highest rank in the sight of God (see, for example, Q. 9:20, *Those who believe, and emigrate and strive with might and main, in God's cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of God: they are the people who will achieve [salvation]*). Indeed, it is explicitly stated in Q. 9:111 that God has 'purchased' from the believers their persons and their goods (*amwāl*): they fight for his sake and, while they may lose their lives in the process, they will be given a most wonderful reward: eternal life in Paradise itself.

### The Enigma of Q. 104:3

The fulcrum upon which our reassessment of *māl* rests here is the unequivocal statement made in Q. 104:3, namely that some men believe that their wealth will enable them to live forever:



*Woe to every [kind of] scandal-monger and-backbiter, who pileth up wealth and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever! (Q. 104:1–3).*

Unsurprisingly, the largely paraphrastic nature of classical exegesis means that it is able to shed little light on the depth psychology of wealth-pride, particularly insofar as it concerns longings for immortality. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, says that the wealth-proud believe in the power of their accumulated wealth to grant them immortality in *this* world;<sup>29</sup> Ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī are of the same opinion.<sup>30</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī offers a little more elaboration. The accumulation of wealth, he opines, often results in heedlessness and over-inflated hopes and dreams; gradually, one's immersion in the luxuries of life leads one to believe that wealth and riches will keep one alive forever.<sup>31</sup> He goes on to say that the aya may also be an allusion to the fact that it is only righteous action that can secure immortality: the doer of good deeds will be remembered forever in this world, while partaking of eternal life in the world to come.<sup>32</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī comes to a similar conclusion, adding that the use of the past tense *akhlada* (*yaḥṣabu anna mālahu **akhladahū***) shows that in the mind of the wealth-proud man, immortality and exemption from death are taken as given. However, such a man needs to work hard to protect his wealth from diminution, simply in order to remain alive; consequently, his accumulation of wealth must be ceaseless.<sup>33</sup>

Early modern and contemporary exegetes generally tend not to stray too far from the interpretations of their classical counterparts with regard to Q. 104:3: the ceaseless accumulation of *māl* is seen as both a cause and a symptom of man's tendency to neglect truth, one result of which is the erroneous belief that one's wealth will buy one immunity from death and allow one, in some way, shape or form, to live forever.<sup>34</sup>

That wealth is a symbol of immortality in the mindset of some is, then, clear from both the Qur'anic text and the explanations of the exegetes. However, for insight into precisely why it should be a symbol of everlasting life, and how this symbology works in practice, I believe that we need to look outside the classical Muslim scholarly tradition and view the question from a social scientific perspective. To this end, we shall take our cue from the theoretical framework supplied by, *inter alios*, the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, and in particular his writings on dominant immortality ideologies.

### **Ernest Becker and the Theory of 'Immortality Striving'**

As a cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker was searching for explanations of why human society develops in the way that it does; his particular focus of interest was why human society is so aggressive, and why different social groups are so

intolerant of each other. Drawing on his background in psychology, and inspired by a wide range of thinkers such as Otto Rank, Norman O. Brown and Søren Kierkegaard, Becker concluded towards the end of his life that he had discovered a simple yet exceedingly important explanatory principle for comprehending the psycho-dynamics which underpin all human culture. His main ideas, summarised with extreme brevity, are as follows.<sup>35</sup>

According to Becker, all men want to endure and prosper, and in some sense achieve permanence. However, the existential dilemma that we face is that we are mortal. Awareness of our mortality brings with it an overwhelming anxiety that must be masked if we are to function in the world. To suppress this awareness, we participate in projects of immortality, which, Becker assures us, we pursue all the time. All societies and cultures, he asserts, are based on dominant immortality ideologies – those shared by the largest number of people in the group. Within these ideologies there are sub-dominant ideologies as well, which means that at any point in history, a culture may be analysed as a complex system of countless different immortality games and strategies, sanctioned by the dominant ideology and presented to the people within that culture so that they may maintain the illusion of individual and collective immortality.

The strategies employed in order to overcome mortality anxiety are numerous, but tend to fall into two main categories. The first is the desire for individuation and the concomitant endeavour to acquire personal immortality, even at the expense of others. This strategy engenders the illusion that one is transcending human creatureliness by standing out above the rest. The second strategy is to find one's symbolic immortality in yielding to the overarching strategy of the group or community in which one is embedded. Examples of immortality strategies from history will inevitably be amalgams of these two types. What all strategies have in common is the creation of 'immortality symbols' with which people identify themselves and through which society as a whole, and individuals in particular, are able to achieve symbolic immortality. The concatenation of immortality symbols and the strategies used to maintain them form what Becker refers to as the *causa-sui* project, or the means by which individuals and societies create the 'vital lie' necessary for their own self-deception.<sup>36</sup>

The creation of the 'vital lie' in pre-modern society, which is where our interest lies, is described in Becker's final work, *Escape From Evil*.<sup>37</sup> There, Becker paints a broad-brush picture of the evolution of immortality ideologies from prehistory to modernity. Beginning with primitive man, he shows how the immortality motive gave rise to ritual and sacrifice, both of which were seen as techniques to promote and maintain the flow of life-power through the group. Ritual and sacrifice did not necessarily guarantee the perpetuation of the individual in the physical realm, but they were means by which the continuation of existence in the realm of the spirits

might be assured. The centrality of ritual to the primitive *Weltanschauung* cannot be overestimated, for it was through ritual that man was able to both give and control life-power itself. Ritual is a means of organising life and, as such, has to be carried out according to a particular 'theory of prosperity' – a way of encouraging or inducing nature to give more life to the tribe.<sup>38</sup> With archaic man, the theory of prosperity was for the most part elemental and organic, with man looking to nature to see where the power came from. Principles of fecundity and generation were abstracted and then embodied through impersonation, with man taking on the role of the elements. The cosmos was divided conceptually into the heavens and the earth, with all prosperity deemed to emanate from the orderly interaction between the two. The interplay of the heavens and the earth, like the interplay between the sexes, was one of a number of interdependent polarities which characterised the worldview of archaic man. These opposing yet complementary principles – right and left; light and dark; power and weakness – enabled primitive man to see reality 'in the round' in order to control it. Death was part of this, and had to be embodied by primitive man in order to be controlled.<sup>39</sup>

Key to primitive ritual was the act of sacrifice, which was designed not only to renew creation but also to anchor its practitioners in the invisible dimension of reality, creating a mystical, essential self that had superhuman powers. Man's social representation of nature took place through the twin processes of 'macrocosmisation' and 'microcosmisation'.<sup>40</sup> In the former, man inflated his own importance to cosmic proportions by seeing every part of his own self as having a correspondence in the macrocosm. In the latter, man humanised the cosmos by projecting earthly phenomena onto the heaven: with the transference of animals to heaven through the creation of the zodiac, for example, mundane human affairs were given a timeless and superhuman validity. The stars came to preside over destiny and man became the centre of all things. In this way, man humanised the heavens and sacralised the earth, thus fusing the two into a unity. Through this opposition of culture with nature, man arrogated to himself a special spiritual destiny which allowed him to transcend his animality and gain a special status in the cosmic scheme of things. No longer was he just a biped that hunts, eats and dies, but a being of importance and consequence who was able to give eternal life to himself by means of shared socio-religious rituals based on the principle of cosmic regeneration. Everything depended on the prescribed ritual, which was deemed to put one in possession of eternity through unity with the sacrifice. Primitive life was not just a matter of the quest for more life-power in this realm; it was also a quest for immortality.

The sacrificial ritual, then, was concerned with the attraction of power. Becker describes how the original sacrifice was almost always food, since food is what men needed from the gods as the basis of life.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, if food contains power, it always signifies something more than itself: it possesses a mysterious inner essence

or spirit. When archaic man gave food as gifts, he was giving a piece of life itself: the gifts given by primitive men to each other possessed *mana* power, or the essence of supernatural life. Through mutual gift-giving, the cycle of power between giver and receiver was perpetuated. Through offering gifts to each other, and to the gods, the stream of life was kept running: the more one gave, the more one received.

Taking his cue from Hocart, Becker sees in primitive man's sacrificial offerings the origins of trade.<sup>42</sup> For gifts were given not only to one's own gods, but also to the gods of one's kinsmen. This led to the exchange of goods between different groups and, by extension, the direct motive of the creation of surplus for the sake of exchange. This exchange began quite simply as a contest, determining who could give most to the gods of their kinsmen. The more one gave, the more life force was released, thus adding to one's cosmic heroism and self-esteem. One becomes a hero in the eyes of the gods as well as the eyes of men: one acquires *mana* power. In gift-giving and sacrifice, therefore, one sees what Roheim refers to as 'narcissistic capitalism' – the equation of wealth with magical power.<sup>43</sup> The surplus created, and often offered to the gods in great piles of food and other goods, has its function in terms of the power it signifies. As Becker points out, man's existential insecurity propels him to accumulate things beyond his needs precisely because he realises how insecure he actually is. Man's need to accumulate a surplus, then, was driven by his fundamental need to overcome the limitations of the human condition and achieve victory over impotence, finitude and, by extension, death itself.<sup>44</sup>

With the creation of surplus came the emergence of inequality, and Becker shows how those individuals who came to embody the invisible world – the shamans, the guardians of the altar, the possessors of the ritual techniques – were able gradually to command the same authority over other men as was accorded to the spirits and the gods themselves. The power of the invisible world as embodied in certain figures allowed them to hold other men in their thrall. Instead of seeking a hero among the dead, man was now able to find him among the living, in the person of the power figure. The power figure was traditionally the individual who excelled in some way over his fellows, and who consequently appeared to possess an extra 'charge of power' or *mana* from the invisible realm.<sup>45</sup> The power figure was both respected and feared, for he was nothing less than an isthmus which linked the visible to the invisible world. Furthermore, he was almost invariably the figure responsible for the redistribution of surplus wealth in society, thus combining spiritual stature with economic power.

All power, then, is sacred power because it derives from the desire for immortality. And it culminates in the willing subjection of men to people and objects which embody that immortality power. Sacredness is thus seen to inhere in individuals, who are able to hold others in their thrall by a form of enchantment. Men bow down to such figures, Becker argues, because they treat them as objects of transference.

They take their hopes and needs, their desires and their fears, and then project them onto certain objects or individuals to which they can then yield, and in which they can find justification for their own 'immortality project'. Wealth, as we shall see, is one such object, while the possessor of wealth is another.<sup>46</sup>

### **The *māl/amlwāl* Verses Reappraised**

We will begin our reappraisal by looking at several key passages which deal with the fetishisation of wealth and power; we will then focus more closely on the Qur'anic treatment of the *causa-sui* project as reflected in the 'garden parable' in Q. 18:32–44.

A common thread linking a number of prophetic experiences recorded in the Qur'an is the refusal of addressee communities to embrace as prophets those who are visibly lacking in wealth and connections. The encounter between Noah and his people stands out in this regard:

*Noah said: 'O my Lord! They have disobeyed me, but they follow [men] whose wealth (māl) and children give them no increase but only loss. And they have devised a tremendous plot. And they have said to each other, "Abandon not your gods: abandon neither Wadd nor Suwā<sup>c</sup>, neither Yaghūth nor Ya<sup>c</sup>ūq, nor Nasr"' (Q. 71:21–3).*

Noah's invocation comes at the end of a prophetic mission characterised by its almost total lack of success. In an earlier passage, he complains to God that he has called to his people night and day, both in public and in private, but with little effect: every time he has called to them they have *thrust their fingers into their ears, covered themselves up with their garments, grown obstinate, and given themselves up to arrogance* (Q. 71:7). Preferring the 'beyond' of the dominant immortality ideology which underpins their particular cultural structures to the alien 'beyond' posited by the hapless Noah, they continue to rebuke him until they are overcome by the Flood.

The prophet Shu<sup>c</sup>ayb undergoes a similar experience. Having received his call from God, he invites his people to monotheism, to honest commercial dealing, and to tolerance with regard to those who believe in God. Their response is typical of most of the addressee communities in the Qur'an:

*They said: 'O Shu<sup>c</sup>ayb! Does thy [religion of] prayer command thee that we leave off the worship which our fathers practised, or that we leave off doing what we like with our property (amlwāl)? Truly, thou art the one that forbearth with faults and is right-minded!' (Q. 11:87).*

Shu'ayb had invited his community to forego idolatry and commit themselves to one God only; he also counselled honesty in all economic dealings, and tolerance with regard to those who wished to follow the monotheistic creed. In return, his community attempted to stone him, and might have succeeded had they not been visited with a cataclysmic earthquake which killed all but Shu'ayb and his followers.<sup>47</sup>

In both cases, the concerns of the addressee community hinge on the twin issues of idols and wealth. Noah's community is portrayed as being in thrall of those who are rich in possessions and offspring; Shu'ayb's people are worried that they will be forced to relinquish their ancestral customs and not be allowed to dispose of their wealth as they think fit. The 'codified hero system' is in both cases wealth-driven and sanctioned by both the invisible gods they have constructed and the visible embodiments of prosperity – the rich elders of society – that their cultural systems have created. The customs of the ancients and the wealth embodied by the leaders of society are important not in themselves but as conduits for the flow of power.<sup>48</sup> As Becker puts it:<sup>49</sup>

Power is the life pulse that sustains man in every epoch, and unless the student understands power figures and power sources he can understand nothing vital about social history. The history of man's 'fall' into stratified society can be traced around the figures of his heroes, to whom he is beholden for the power he wants most – to persevere as an organism, to continue experiencing.

To 'continue experiencing' is a corollary of the need for self-expansion and the hunger for durability. Power – and allegiance to the sources of power – may thus be said to lie at the heart of unregenerate man's quest for immortality. In primitive societies, invisible power flowed from the pool of ancestors and spirits, just as today it resides in technology. In the nascent stratified societies exemplified by the communities of Noah and Shu'ayb, invisible power is concretised in the form of visible wealth. Furthermore, it is wealth that offers not only the promise of immortality, but immunity from any punishment that the God of the prophets threatens to visit upon them in return for their intransigence:

*They said: 'We have more in wealth (amwāl) and in sons, and we cannot be punished' (Q. 34:35).*

The importance of visible manifestations of power may become a little clearer when we consider the experience of Moses. Moses is portrayed as facing problems not dissimilar to those of Noah and Shu'ayb:

*Moses prayed: 'Our Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on Pharaoh and his chiefs splendour and wealth (amwāl) in the life of the present,*

*and so, our Lord, they mislead [men] from Thy Path. Deface our Lord, the features of their wealth (amwāl), and send hardness to their hearts, so they will not believe until they see the grievous penalty'* (Q. 10:88).

In the person of Pharaoh, Becker sees the culmination of a long psychological process: the move from allegiance to the invisible gods of the spirit world, through the fashioning of images and idols, to the establishment and worship of visible gods on earth. The contemporaneity of this move with the change from an economy of sharing among equals to one of pooling of resources via a high-ranked and powerful authority figure suggests that the two are inextricably linked.

At the level of the 'equalitarian society' posited by Paul Radin – the level of simple hunter-gatherer tribes – the wellbeing of the social group is achieved through a process of reciprocal exchange, with goods being traded freely among the group. In the 'rank society' described by Hocart, however, the economic process changes. Now, the flow of goods is directed to a distinct centre of power – a figure of authority – who receives the fruits of the group's labours and redistributes them. This redistribution is, in theory, in accordance with need, but over time is carried out increasingly by the leader's own fiat, hence the susceptibility of the process to corruption.<sup>50</sup>

The reasons behind the move from equalitarian to rank society are, of course, extremely complex and beyond the scope of this paper. One reason posited by Becker, however, demands our attention:<sup>51</sup>

Why did people go from an economy of simple sharing among equals to one of pooling via an authority figure who has a high rank and absolute power? The answer is that man *wanted a visible god always present to receive his offerings, and for this he was willing to pay the price of his own subjection.*

A god that can see, be seen and respond is always preferred since he is able to visibly accept the group's offerings, thus leaving them in no doubt that they are favoured – hence the historical eagerness of leaderless tribes to acquire a chief 'as soon as they could find a nobleman whose high rank or age gave hopes that he would be acceptable to the spirits'.<sup>52</sup> One of the reasons that the Jews were mocked, Becker contends, was that they had no image of their god, who must have seemed like the product of delusional thinking when compared to the Pharaoh in all his glory: a living, breathing, visibly wealthy and powerful god-king who, as prime object of transference, becomes the embodiment of all of the invisible powers in the cosmos.

To explain man's willingness to subject himself with such alacrity to these god-king figures, Becker invokes the twin principles of microcosmisation and

macrocosmisation: the processes whereby man entwines his own destiny with that of the cosmos by bringing the heavens down into his own ambit while simultaneously blowing himself up into the central concern of the cosmos. In primitive communities, the performance of ritual had served to enact the struggle between life and death, light and darkness; through the ritual offering of the sacrifice, primitive man endeavoured to invoke the invisible powers of the cosmos in order to enhance his visible well-being and prosperity. With the advent of figures such as the pharaoh, however, the whole of this cosmological drama is summed up in the person of the god-king himself.<sup>53</sup>

He is the god who receives offerings, the protagonist of light against dark, and the embodiment of the invisible forces of nature – specifically the sun. In Hocart's happy phrase, he is the 'Sun-Man'. Divine kingship sums up the double process of macro- and microcosmization: it represents a 'solarization of man, and a humanizing of the sun'.

For early man, Becker argues, the light and heat from the sun were seen as 'the archetypes of all mysterious power', and the invisible source responsible for the growth and vibrancy of all life on earth. Consequently, once man came to equate the god-king with the sun, these two become conflated: as a result, man comes to believe that the god-king can actually vivify the earth. At the very mention of the pharaoh's name, the words 'health', 'prosperity' and 'life' would also be invoked.<sup>54</sup> Given that these words embody the end result of man's immortality striving, it is not difficult to comprehend the ease with which god-king was able to hold men in his thrall:

*Then [Pharaoh] collected [his men] and made a proclamation, saying, 'I am your Lord, Most High' (Q. 79:23–4).*

The god-king, for his part, achieves his own heroic apotheosis by claiming divinity, while his subjects bask in his reflected – and immortal – glory.

In the person of Solomon, we see the disavowal of wealth as a symbol of social esteem and cultural greatness by one who himself was blessed with a whole kingdom.

*Now when [the embassy] came to Solomon, he said: 'Will ye give me abundance in wealth (māl)? But that which God has given me is better than that which He has given you! Nay it is ye who rejoice in your gift!' (Q. 27:36).*

Questioning the exchange of gifts that is customary between visiting dignitaries and their hosts, Solomon tells the delegation from Sheba that although the Queen would shower him with riches, that which God has given – belief and eternal life – is far better. Despite the fact that Solomon was a king in his own right, he desisted from



entering a relationship that was mediated from the outset by considerations of wealth and status. Like all social ceremonials, gift-giving can be seen as another example of a 'joint theatrical staging whose purpose it is to sustain and create meaning for all its members'.<sup>55</sup> The denigration of the gift is of significance here because it signals Solomon's refusal to enhance the cultural meaning which shores up the identity of the Queen of Sheba. If the encounter is to have any meaning for him, it must be on terms not dictated by the 'vital lie' she is trying to perpetuate through the ritual of gift-giving, but by the word of God and the promise of real rather than symbolic immortality.

As the Qur'an shows, it is not only his prophets whom unregenerate man expects to embody wealth and prosperity. The valorisation of wealth as the qualification *par excellence* for political leadership is also highlighted:

*Their Prophet said to them: 'God hath appointed Ṭālūt as king over you.' They said: 'How can he exercise authority over us when we are better fitted than he to exercise authority, and he is not even gifted, with wealth (māl) in abundance?' He said: 'God hath chosen him above you, and hath gifted him abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess: God granteth His authority to whom He pleaseth. God careth for all, and He knoweth all things' (Q. 2:247).*

The people over whom Ṭālūt – the Biblical king Saul – was appointed complain that he is not a suitable candidate for kingdom on account of the fact that he *lacks wealth in abundance*. For them, the most important criterion is not the possession of leadership skills but the possession of conspicuous wealth: how can a king be a king if, as in the case of Saul, he hails from the smallest tribe in Israel and has few possessions to his name? For unregenerate man, a king can be a king only if he is able to embody the aspirations to greatness of the people over whom he rules.

The Ṭālūt narrative also gives us important insights into the group psychology of the addressee communities on account of the perspective it opens up on the issue of power itself, and why men willingly subject themselves to the authority of others. As Becker says:<sup>56</sup>

Why are groups so blind and stupid? – men have always asked. Because they demand illusions, answered Freud, they 'constantly give what is unreal precedence over what is real'. And we know why. The real world is simply too terrible to admit; it tells man that he is a small, trembling animal who will decay and die. Illusion changes all this, makes man seem important, vital to the universe, immortal in some way. Who transmits this illusion, if not the parents by imparting the macro-lie of the cultural *causa-sui*? The masses look to the leaders to give them just the untruth they need ...

The 'untruth' here is the Beckerian 'vital lie' in which men need to feel embedded in order to function. For unregenerate man, the ideal leader is one who can act as their object of transference, and under whose aegis they can act out their own individual *causa-sui* projects. There appears to be little, if any, substantial difference between ideals of kingship in the mindset of the people of Saul and that of primitive man. If primitive man deferred to the privileges and authority of others, it was because they secured life and assured the perpetuation of the tribe. The great heroes of the tribe were able to display trophies which reflected their immortality power; to identify with the great is to soak up some of their greatness for oneself. Becker reminds us that the basic function of the hero in history is to gamble with life and defy death, and if men pledge allegiance to him, or worship his memory, it is precisely because he embodies the triumph over what they fear the most: annihilation and death.<sup>57</sup> The people rejected Saul because he lacked the very thing they deemed necessary for the attainment of heroic apotheosis and the perpetuation of their own particular 'vital lie': wealth, and the power that it signifies.

### The Qur'an and the *causa-sui* Project

The consequences that 'wealth-pride' may have for man in both this world and the next are delineated clearly in a number of *ayas*. Significant in this regard are a number of parabolic passages in which unregenerate man's cultivation of the earthly garden can be seen in a very Beckerian sense to serve as a physical representation of the *causa-sui* project that is always doomed to failure.

The most striking of these appears in *Sūrat al-Kahf*. It concerns two men, one of whom has been blessed with gardens and orchards that produce abundant fruits and grains. The owner of the gardens surveys his bountiful harvest and, in the course of a 'mutual argument', boasts to his companion that he is superior to him in terms of the wealth (*māl*) he enjoys and the honour (*'izza*) accorded to him by other men. Later, he enters his garden *in a state [of mind] unjust to his soul* and declares his belief that his possessions will never perish. Even if there is a day of judgement, he asserts, and he is brought back to his Lord, he is sure that he will surely find there *something better in exchange* (Q. 18:34–6).

At this point, his companion questions the garden owner's behaviour and cautions him against placing trust in things other than God:

*'Dost thou deny Him Who created thee out of the dust, then out of a sperm drop, then fashioned thee into a man? But [I think] for my part that He is God, My Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. Why didst thou not, as thou goeth into thy garden, say: "God's Will [be done]! There is no power but from God!" If thou dost see me less than thee in wealth and sons (mālan wa-waladan), it may be that my*

*Lord will give me something better than thy garden, and that He will send on thy garden thunderbolts [by way of reckoning] from heaven, making it [but] slippery sand! (Q. 18:37–40).*

Two ayas later, and the companion's predictions are realised: the garden is destroyed and its owner is left distraught, *twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property* and wishing that he had never ascribed partners to God (Q. 18:42).

The parable is evocative of the Beckerian thesis in a number of ways. Firstly, there is what appears to be a direct link made between the possession of wealth and the ability to command self-esteem: '*More wealth (māl) have I than you, and more honour and power in [my following of] men*' (Q. 18:34). For the garden owner, the existence of an abundant garden is not important for what it is in itself, but for its symbolic significance, for its ability to both project his own power and attract the power of others. And power, the key to durability, is what lies at the heart of all immortality striving. As Becker points out 'each person nourishes his immortality in the ideology of self-perpetuation to which he gives his allegiance; this gives his life the only abiding significance it can have'.<sup>58</sup> The 'ideology of self-perpetuation' to which one gives one's allegiance – the project of 'self-creation' or *causa-sui* – changes according to epoch and cultural context. In order to deny that he is powerless and cannot stand alone, man projects his hopes and fears onto a project – any project – which embodies the power that he lacks but so obviously needs. This act of transference can involve almost anything.<sup>59</sup>

It need not be overtly a god or openly a stronger person, but it can be the power of an all-absorbing activity, a passion, a dedication to a game, a way of life, that like a comfortable web keeps a person buoyed up and ignorant of himself, of the fact that he does not rest on his own center. All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely. Augustine was a master analyst of this, as were Kierkegaard, Scheler, and Tillich in our day. They saw that man could strut and boast all he wanted, but that he really drew his 'courage to be' from a god, a string of sexual conquests, a Big Brother, a flag, the proletariat, and the fetish of money and the size of a bank balance.

Secondly, that the subject of wealth-pride is an individual and the object of his hubris a garden resonates with the larger picture painted by Becker of the move from Radin's 'equalitarian society' to Hocart's 'rank society'. As the advent of agriculture began the break-up of the primitive world, the rise of the early states and the focus of organised society on the twin institutions of kingship and the patriarchal family

meant that the dynamics which underpin the larger socio-cultural *causa-sui* project begin to change. In primitive society, the whole group had created *mana* power by means of jointly celebrated ritual. In the new 'rank society', it is the king who represents the new locus of spiritual power from which the subjects take succour. Previously, each person had helped to exercise control over the cosmos through shared ritual; now, all the individual can do is imitate the king in order to re-enact the divine plan in his own domain, in much the same way that primitive ritualism, through the setting up of the altar and the act of sacrifice, was able to re-enact in miniature the drama of the whole cosmos. In this way, the individual in Hocart's 'rank society' is able to receive a reflection of the king's powers and achieve the respect and esteem he feels he deserves.<sup>60</sup>

Thirdly, the garden parable illustrates the tension which exists between the twin ontological motives which, for Becker, inform all human actions. On the one hand, man is attracted toward the 'rightness' of beauty, goodness and perfection and pushes himself to expand in order to attain these, impelled as he is 'by a powerful desire to identify with the cosmic process, to merge himself with the rest of nature'. The urge to immortality that is projected onto the object of transference is not a simple reaction to the underlying death-anxiety but also 'a reaching out by one's whole being toward life'. The cultivation of the garden, which represents nurture, expansion, vibrancy and beauty, is also the cultivation of the *agape* side of man's nature.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, man strives to be unique, to stand out as something different and express his individuality. If *agape* allows man to self-expand into unity with creation, *eros* encourages him to self-expand in a way that highlights his individuation and enables him to stand apart – and aloof – from others. Seen from the perspective of this second ontological motive, the garden is not merely a reflection of all that is good; by dint of the fact that it is seen as one man's possession, it becomes the means through which he achieves self-esteem and, by extension, his own share of immortality.

The garden trope is of course key to our understanding of the Qur'anic view of paradise, with the heavenly *janna* comprising the locus in the hereafter of everlasting peace, happiness and salvation. Yet it is in the Qur'anic treatment of the worldly garden – the *janna* cultivated by man here on earth, as in the preceding parable – that the significance of the heavenly garden is thrown into sharp, Beckerian focus. On at least half a dozen occasions, the earthly garden is depicted by the Qur'an as the object of transference upon which unregenerate man projects his desires for self-expansion, the accumulation of *mana* power and, by extension, a share in the everlasting. On each of these occasions, man's faith in his own *causa-sui* project is shown to be futile as his garden – his heaven on earth – either perishes or is destroyed.<sup>62</sup> For the Qur'an, man's cultivation of the earthly garden must be

sacralised as an act performed for the sake of God and in appreciation of the fact that nothing can take place without divine sanction.<sup>63</sup> Earthly contentment is possible, in the eyes of the Qur'an, if man's cultivation of his 'garden' is mediated by belief and trust in God. Man can have a garden on earth as long as he retains full awareness that he is not the power behind its cultivation, and that it may be taken from him at any minute. In other words, he must, in order to live safely, be aware of the danger: he must confront the possibility of death and destruction and yield to it. If he does not, and he creates his garden as a hubristic *causa-sui* project, nemesis is bound to follow:

*So his fruits [and enjoyment] were encompassed with ruin, and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had [now] tumbled to pieces to its very foundations. And he could only say, 'Woe is me! Would I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!'* (Q. 18:42).

The ever-present possibility that the earthly garden may be taken from man at any moment illustrates what Becker describes as the ambivalence of the transference object, which in turn is the source of man's perpetual disquietude. For, as he points out, man inevitably:<sup>64</sup>

... experiences 'transference terror'; the terror of losing the object ... of not being able to live without it. The terror of his own finitude and impotence still haunts him, but now in the precise form of the transference object. How implacably ironic is human life. The transference object always looms larger than life size because it represents all of life and hence all of one's fate. The transference object becomes the focus of the problem of one's freedom because one is compulsively dependent on it; it sums up all other natural dependencies and emotions.

## Conclusion

Having viewed a number of the *amwāl* verses under the microscope of the Beckerian thesis, certain tentative conclusions may now be drawn. As the 'rejection narratives' show, the reach of the 'dominant immortality ideology' as outlined by Becker would seem to extend quite comfortably to the addressee communities that appear in the Qur'an. Moreover, its strictures on the dangers inherent in man's inordinate love of wealth, together with the insights it gives into the psycho-dynamics underpinning prophetic rejection, tend to suggest that Qur'anic discourse on wealth is fuelled by what appears to be an uncannily prescient understanding of the *causa-sui* project in all but name.

As its treatment of the numerous encounters between prophets and addressee communities shows, the Qur'an portrays the pre-Muḥammadan world as one peopled by societies in which wealth and offspring represented the means *par excellence* by which man might achieve heroic apotheosis. Becker shows how the ideological capital which funded the construction of cultural facades and enabled those who fashioned them to elevate themselves above death underwent a gradual evolution, from the dependence of primitive man on the invisible world of gods and ancestral spirits to the creation, in later societies, of distinctly visible gods, idols and objects as a conduit for man's offerings and a means of working out his aspirations for immortality. Understandably, the Qur'an does not compartmentalise man into the primitive and post-primitive, and so does not trace this evolution with the same historiographical robustness as Becker.<sup>65</sup> However, the conclusions that it draws are, *mutatis mutandis*, more or less the same. Unregenerate man – the addressee of divine revelation – is in Qur'anic terms a man whose *causa-sui* project is embedded in the 'life of the world'. While this life has many different cultural manifestations, the motive which carries it forward – the achievement of permanence through self-expansion via *things of this world* – is the same. And at the heart of this self-expansion lies the accumulation of wealth, in all of its infinite variety.

Thus, for unregenerate man, *amwāl wa-awlād* (wealth and offspring) represent the most tangible fruits of his heroic endeavour on earth. As such they become the measure by which the individual – and, more importantly, the power relationships which inform his cultural life – are measured; they become the guarantor of personal self-esteem and earthly felicity; and they become a source of immunity from the punishments that the prophets claim will be meted out to them as a result of their perceived intransigence. 'Wealth equals power' may be a cliché, but once one apprehends that power is the conduit through which life – and, with it, immortality – flows, then the dynamics at play in the cultural life of unregenerate man become comprehensible.

The Qur'an, for its part, is uncompromising in its rejection of the pre-Muḥammadan fetishisation of 'wealth and offspring'. However, wealth *per se* is no way denigrated – so long as it is sacralised by righteous intention and correct action. Whereas in primitive societies, *amwāl wa-awlād* were what one 'had', and what guaranteed one's continuance after death, with the advent of the divinely-revealed religion, and particularly in Islam, where it is more finely nuanced, offspring and possessions continue to be passports to eternity, but in a manner precisely reverse to that of the 'having' societies.<sup>66</sup> The Qur'an exhorts its listeners to be ready to sacrifice their 'offspring and possessions'; to lend them as a metaphorical 'beautiful loan' which will be repaid with profit by God in the life to come. This was a guarantee of eternity that was won by having and giving, rather than having and keeping – and the transaction was mediated not by power but by faith: trust in the divine promise.

Given this, one may argue that social justice is a secondary concern of the Qur'an, where it is seen as an adjunct – a necessary and automatic adjunct – of self-reform. Man's primary duty as adumbrated by the Qur'an is, it would seem, to himself. Wealth is not scorned because it is seen as the root of all social evil, but because it is something which, if not understood and appreciated properly, can enmesh man in the mire of 'worldly life' and obscure his connection with the Creator. From the *ayas* on *amwāl wa-banūn*, then, the Qur'an emerges as a document intent on warning man not against the social evils of misuse of wealth, but of the fact that by misunderstanding the nature of wealth, man is imperilling his own future and the possibility of eternal life. This is, of course, in contradistinction to the belief of unregenerate man in wealth as the key to eternity, summed up in the *aya* '... *thinking that his wealth would make him last forever*'.

From the cultural anthropological perspective, then, it appears that not only do the Qur'anic narratives under scrutiny here enjoy consonance with Judaeo-Christian teachings on wealth, framing it squarely within the continuum of condemnatory teachings on the misuse of ownership found in all of the monotheistic traditions,<sup>67</sup> but also they appear to dovetail quite neatly with the theory of dominant immortality ideology as adumbrated by a number of modern and near-contemporary social theorists such as Rank, Brown and, of course, Becker himself. Becker appears to have closed the circle on the issue of cultural hero-systems and the existential dilemma that man encounters on account of his 'individuality-within-finitude'.<sup>68</sup> However, whether his central thesis is applicable to the Qur'anic approach to immortality as a whole remains unclear: any judgement on the matter must be reserved until further, more extensive research has been carried out and a long-awaited Beckerian perspective on the Islamic revelation in its entirety has been established.<sup>69</sup>

## NOTES

1 Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), p. 75.

2 The term 'addressee communities' here denotes those groups and nations in the Qur'an to whom prophets were sent and the message of monotheism communicated.

3 Those passages in the Qur'an which chronicle the unsuccessful attempts of the prophets to reach their own people are referred to here as the 'rejection narratives'.

4 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad in Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 66–7.

5 Q. 102:1, *The mutual rivalry for piling up [the good things of this world] diverts you [from the more serious things]*.

6 This paper is the first in what will hopefully be a series of linked studies into the functionality of the Beckerian thesis of immortality striving with regard to Islam in general and the Qur'an in particular. Whenever Becker's later works touched upon religion, it was almost always the Judaeo-Christian traditions with which he engaged. Of Islam he makes only one brief mention, and thus to test the applicability of his theories to certain aspects of the Islamic experience is both a challenge and, I believe, a necessity.

7 M. Plessner, art. 'Māl' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, vol. 6, p. 205.

8 Rohi Baalbaki, *Al-Mawrid: A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li'l-Malāyīn, 1977), p. 1143.

9 Ibn Manṣūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (15 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Sādir, 1955), vol. 11, p. 635.

10 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Nihāya fī ghārīb al-ḥadīth wa'l-athar* (4 vols, Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Islāmiyya, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 70.

11 Muhammad Wohidul Islam, 'Al-Mal: The Concept of Property in Islamic Legal Thought', *Arab Law Quarterly* 14:4 (1999), pp. 361–8, p. 362.

12 Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī uṣūl al-sharīʿa* (4 vols, Cairo: n.p., n.d.) vol. 2, p. 17.

13 Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ashbāh wa'l-naẓāʾir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1983), p. 327.

14 Islam, 'al-Mal', p. 363.

15 I am indebted to Professor Paul Starkey and Dr Mahjoob Zweiri of Durham University for their insights into the definitional scope of *māl* and *amwāl*.

16 Neal Robinson, *Discovering The Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach To A Veiled Text* (Canterbury: SCM Press, 2003), p. 71.

17 For the purposes of this paper, the identification of a sura as either Meccan or Medinan is based on both the chronology included in the standard Egyptian edition together with that established by Nöldeke and Schwally. While these chronologies have substantial differences as far as the order of individual suras is concerned, on the issue of the Meccan or Medinan origin of the *māl/amwāl* verses under discussion here, they speak as one. For more on Muslim and Western attempts to establish a chronology of Qur'anic revelation, see Robinson, *Discovering The Qur'an*, pp. 60–96.

18 Locating the ayas chronologically in order to chart thematic progression is as a rule made more difficult by the fact that a number of suras are clearly composite: some ayas revealed in Mecca were inserted in Medinan suras – and vice versa – at the time of the ʿUthmānic recension. The *māl/amwāl* verses do not appear to be among these.

19 The precise statistical breakdown is as follows. Spread over 29 ayas, there are 30 occurrences of *māl/amwāl* in the Meccan phase of the revelation: *māl* is mentioned 21 times and *amwāl* 9 times. In the Medinan phase of the revelation there are 56 occurrences of *māl/amwāl* spread over 51 ayas: *amwāl* is mentioned 52 times and *māl* 9 times. These include, of course, the various possessive forms such as *māluhu*, *amwālukum*, *amwāluhum*, and so on.

20 The term 'unregenerate man' is used here as a convenient shorthand for 'unbelievers' (*kāfirūn*), 'hypocrites' (*munāfiqūn*) and 'associationists' (*mushrikūn*), all of whom are excoriated by the Qur'an for their refusal to embrace the divine revelation. The term reflects the Qur'anic perspective and should not be construed as a value judgment on the part of the author of this paper.

21 Statistically, the distribution of these different types of *māl/amwāl* verse across the Mecca/Medina divide is not without significance. Of the 29 Meccan ayas under scrutiny, 3 are definitional, 21 are condemnatory, and 5 are prescriptive. Of the 51 Medinan ayas, 15 are definitional, 14 are condemnatory and 22 prescriptive. The fact that the condemnatory-to-prescriptive ratio changes dramatically in the post-Hijrī revelations reflects the general increase in the number of ethico-legal precepts which occurred in Medina as the Muslim community took steps towards becoming a community-state or *umma*.

22 Also: Q. 18:39–40, *If thou dost see me less than thee in wealth and sons, it may be that my Lord will give me something better*; and Q. 18:46, *Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world: but the things that endure, Good Deeds, are best in the sight of thy Lord*.



23 Also Q. 69:28, [He will say] 'Of no profit to me has been my wealth!'; and Q. 92:11, Nor will his wealth profit him when he falls headlong [into the Pit].

24 Q. 6:152 and Q. 17:34.

25 Q. 51:19 and Q. 70:24.

26 Also Q. 2:155, Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives and the fruits [of your toil], but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.

27 The 'purification of wealth' aya – Q. 9:103, Of their wealth take alms, that so though might purify and sanctify them: and pray on their behalf. Verily thy prayers are a source of security for them: and God is One who heareth and knoweth – foreshadows the institution of *zakāt* in the later stages of the Prophet's Medinan career.

28 This is of course no place to explore the multivalent nature of the word 'striving', which cannot be – and indeed never has been – restricted to *jihād* in the military sense alone.

29 Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (13 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1999), vol. 12, p. 688.

30 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* (4 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 586; ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (20 vols, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1984), vol. 20, p. 184.

31 Abū'l-Qāsim ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (4 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1987), vol. 4, p. 795.

32 Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 4, p. 795.

33 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (33 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000), vol. 32, p. 88.

34 See, for example, Maḥmūd Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* (16 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), vol. 15, p. 461; Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Tafsīr al-mīzān* (20 vols, Tehran: Bunyād-i ʿIlmā wa-Fikrā-i ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1984), vol. 20, pp. 823–6.

35 The main biographical source for Ernest Becker is R. Leifer, art. 'Ernest Becker' in David L. Sills (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (17 vols + supplement, New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1976), vol. 18: *Biographical Supplement* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 44–9. Sadly, Becker never enjoyed mainstream acceptance in the social sciences. Nevertheless, his most famous work, the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Denial of Death*, remains in print over 30 years after its initial publication and Becker's death from cancer at the age of 49. One possible reason for his relative obscurity in academic circles was his lack of a single disciplinary home: his training, his academic posts and his scholarly output spanned anthropology, psychiatry, pedagogy and sociology, and inevitably in some quarters he was considered a jack-of-all-trades. Another reason is that much of his career was spent in the backwaters of academe, a victim of the purge of radicals from American universities in the late sixties and early seventies.

36 For Becker's exposition of the conceptual ambivalence of the *causa-sui* project, see his *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1997), pp. 119–23. The 'vital lie' refers to the deliberate obfuscation of reality which man effects in order to shield himself from the anxiety of death and annihilation (see pp. 47–66).

37 For publication details, see n. 1 above.

38 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 16.

39 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 17.

40 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 18.

41 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 29.

42 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 30–1.

43 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 30–1.

44 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 30–1.

45 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 46.

46 Becker's treatment of the rise of economic inequality, the emergence of money as the 'new universal immortality ideology' and the role of wealth-pride in the dynamics of 'social evil' is key to his theory of immortality striving, particularly in the socio-cultural context of medieval and modern society. The scope of this paper does not allow us to discuss it here, however, and readers are referred to chapters 4 to 8 of *Escape from Evil*.

47 The story of Shu'ayb is told in Q. 7:85–93. See also A. Rippin, art. 'Shu'ayb' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, vol. 9, p. 491.

48 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, pp. 44–5.

49 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, p. 45.

50 M.H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 118.

51 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, p. 52. The italics are Becker's.

52 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, p. 53.

53 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 54.

54 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, p. 54.

55 Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1980), p. 106.

56 Becker, *The Denial of Death*, p. 133.

57 Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 43.

58 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, p. 64.

59 Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 55–6.

60 Becker, *Escape From Evil*, pp. 66–8.

61 Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 152–3.

62 See, for example, Q. 34:15–16. Other 'earthly garden' ayas include Q. 2:266, Q. 17:91, Q. 25:8, Q. 26:58 and Q. 68:17–34. The last example in this list is particularly germane, since it deals with the tribulations of the 'People of the Garden' (*aṣḥāb al-janna*), whose refusal to acknowledge God as the true provider led to the destruction of their land by divine wrath and their concomitant loss of livelihood.

63 In both Q. 18:39 and Q. 68:28 it is suggested that it is the hubris of the owners in their refusal to acknowledge God's will which brings destruction upon their gardens.

64 Becker, *The Denial of Death*, p. 146.

65 That is not to say, however, that we cannot build up a picture of this change from the Qur'an itself. The earlier community of Abraham, for example, with its emphasis on idols, is in the tenor of its approach to the prophetic mission quite clearly distinguishable from, say, the later community of Shu'ayb or the followers of Pharaoh.

66 The dichotomy of the 'having' and the 'being' modes of existence and societal behaviour is one of the central planks of Erich Fromm's critique of modernity. See Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987). Chapters 4 to 7 (pp. 75–132) are particularly enlightening with regard to the fundamental differences between these modes of existence.

67 New Testament teachings on the dangers of wealth and wealth-pride abound. See, for example, 1 Timothy 6:9–11, 17–19; Matthew 6:19–21; 16:26.

68 Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, p. 146.

69 One of the criticisms levelled at Becker was that he was unable, or unwilling, to identify the kind of cultural formation which would, to his mind at least, avoid the pitfalls and evils of the dominant immortality ideologies which supposedly inform all human cultural endeavour. For if history is merely the jostling for supremacy of rival immortality projects, as Becker seems to suggest, then who is to say which one is to be preferred? A definitive answer to this question is needed, not least because Becker uses the term 'authentic man' to describe the kind of individual who is able to achieve heroic apotheosis by embracing his own mortality and thus transcending the 'vital lie' which keeps the rest of society asleep. While Becker hints on more than one occasion that 'authentic man' can achieve transcendence only through religious faith, he fails to follow through by explaining at any great length the fundamental differences between the immortality offered by revealed religion and that offered by the dominant ideologies operating within human culture.